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TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE SEX IN CRITICAL  
THEORY: SEXUALITY IN THE EARLY WRITINGS  
OF WILHELM REICH AND ERICH FROMM

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*This paper explores the relationship between society and sexuality, which is overlooked in the later phases of Critical Theory. The author begins with a discussion of the role of sexuality in the writings of Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm. Reich uniformly celebrates and strategically deploys sexuality to critique Western capitalistic society while Fromm lacks a clear and consistent utilization of sexuality. Reich uses Marx in his predominately Freudian framework of sexual repression in trying to address the problem of repression and suppression in Western capitalism. Fromm, on the other hand puts Freud into his already Marxist approach to authority, the family, and ideology. Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer largely ignored sexuality in their later writings, but instead used Freudian concepts in their theory of the authoritarian personality.*

Despite the much celebrated dismissal of Marxism, associated with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the continued alteration of Freudianism, an inexorable conundrum lingers; namely, what does sexuality have to do with subjectivity and the sociopolitical conditions, familial organization, and economic relations which produce it? Quite frequently though, traditional scholars and more innovative intellectuals, like Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan, have overlooked, displaced, and even sublimated this question, opting instead to isolate sexuality, society, class, and consciousness within discretely situated and hermetically sealed fields of inquiry. In contrast with the current, general avoidance of the puzzling fit between erotic, psychic, and socioeconomic domains, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, numerous thinkers, including Otto Fenichel, Reuben Osborn, and Henri de Man, struggled to ascertain the precise, material relations existent among sexuality, society, and subjectivity through the integration of Freudianism and Marxism.

But perhaps, the most memorable formulations, conjoining dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis, were presented by advocates of Critical Theory, especially Erich Fromm, and by the iconoclast, Wilhelm Reich. Since Reich and Fromm read Marx and Freud differently, they produced divergent conceptual schemata for understanding society, subjectivity, and sexuality. In spite of these differences, the psychoanalytical social theories of Fromm and Reich shared much in common. The early writings of Fromm and Reich clearly exemplify

the malleable intersection of psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism. In particular, the role of sexuality within their approaches to the sociocultural field opens a privileged site from which to detail the similarities and differences present within their perspectives. In the space of the following paper, I explore the place of sexuality within the psychoanalytic-Marxist social theories espoused by Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, arguing that whereas Reich uniformly celebrates and strategically deploys sexuality to critique Western capitalistic society, Fromm lacks a clear and consistent utilization of sexuality. To begin, I highlight the distinct interpretations of Freud formulated by Reich and Fromm. From this foundation, I detail the radically different methodological and theoretical frameworks which result from their individual integrations of psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism. Next, I disclose Reich's cultural theory, underscoring his understanding of the relationships between the psyche, the socioeconomic, and the erotic bound up in his concept of sexual revolution. Then, I examine Fromm's inconsistent, partial, and fragmented utilization of sexuality within his psychoanalytic social theory, stressing his concern for human relatedness over and against mere carnal connections among bodies. In conclusion, I trace the significance of "having sex" within a (critical) theory of society which integrates psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism.

#### Confronting Freud

Psychoanalytic theory occupies a central role in the early writings of Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm; however, neither Reich nor Fromm simply regurgitated Freud's conceptual scheme. Instead, both reinterpreted Freud to develop a theory of society applicable to Weimar Germany. Importantly, Reich and Fromm rejected Freud's later writings, especially his argument in support of a self-destructive or death instinct, directing their attention instead to his earlier work. By the same token, their respective readings of Freud, while holding some things in common, display significant differences. In particular, their interpretations of the libido, the role of instinct, the Oedipus complex and the concept of character reveal initial convergences and divergences within their approaches to "social reality."

Fromm originally adhered to Freud's libido theory, but defined it in much broader terms. In essence, he argued that sex-rooted drives, the libido, coexist with self-preservatory drives. Unlike the latter though, libidinal drives, Fromm continued, were adaptable to social circumstances, and indeed, demonstrated extreme plasticity. In accordance with Freud, Fromm held that the sublimation, postponements, and malleability of the libido have a creative or positive impact on society. For the individual, it may also have beneficial consequences, but more often, especially within the context of modern capitalism, a patriarchal familial organization, and authoritarian social structures, it furthered class-based exploitation, while aggravating emotional problems. Although the libido occupied a central role within Fromm's early thought, it always remained a secondary concern. In his later works, initially appearing in a mature form

within *Escape from Freedom*, the question of human relatedness eclipsed the importance once attached to the sex-rooted drives.

In contrast with Fromm, Reich radicalized the libido, positioning it as a primary force at the core of emotional functioning. He understood that the combined effects of the prevailing economic conditions of modern capitalism and the dominant authoritarian and patriarchal social organization of Weimar Germany incited the subject to sublimate, defer, and repress his/her libido, while also encouraging the social suppression of the energy of the sexual instinct. For Reich though, nothing positive arose from these sociological and psychological processes, but rather, they created an unhealthy, orgasmically impotent individual, burdened with a psyche scarred by alienation, class-based exploitation, and misery. In fact, such pressures produced neuroses in 60% of men and 90% of women (1974/1930:49). Psychic health required that the individual's psychic drives were gratified within a heterosexual union rooted in proper orgasm. In many ways, Reich's interpretation of the libido is the engine of his theory.

Both Reich and Fromm understood instinctual drives to be elastic, subject to the socioeconomic forces which shaped their expression. As the above exposition verifies, Fromm initially and quite explicitly affirmed the role and significance of instinct, accepting satisfaction or frustration of instinctual drives as the primary concern of psychoanalysis. But despite his affirmation of instinct, Fromm postulated, even in his early writings, that socioeconomic conditions and the relativity of individual differences molded and shaped the form, dispersal, and expression of instinctual drives. Moreover, always lurking beneath the veneer of instinct was an active interest in the connections among human subjects. By *Escape from Freedom*, when he had nearly completed his renunciation of Freud's conception of instinct, Fromm advocated, in its place, relatedness among individuals as "the key problem of psychology" (1941:12). As he continued (1941:12-13):

The most beautiful as well as the most ugly inclinations of man are not part of a fixed and biologically given human nature, but result from the social process which creates man...Man's nature, his passions, and anxieties are cultural productions.

Throughout his career, Fromm increasingly flirted with and then accepted a culturally-oriented perspective.

Reich, in partial agreement with Fromm, necessarily argued that society shaped the instinctual drives, since his proposition of sexual revolution was predicated upon the ideal of changing the socioeconomic conditions which currently suppress their healthy expression. Appealing to the influence of cultural dynamics, he augmented his explanatory model; but despite his relativistic inclinations, Reich remained faithful to a more biologically-oriented approach which took into account the dynamic interplay of the sociocultural and instinctual structures of the human subject.. In fact, he explained the circumstances leading to the collapse of Weimar Germany as a result of instinctual responses to socioeconomic conditions. "To me, as a psychiatrist

and biologist, the German catastrophe resulted from the biological helplessness of the masses of human beings" (Reich 1974/1933:xii).

Reich and Fromm also reinterpreted Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex. Drawing on the ethnological literature, the two students of mass psychology agreed that Freud had mistakenly universalized a psycho-social process unique to the patriarchal familial structure of Western capitalistic societies. From this common ground, Reich and Fromm offered widely divergent interpretations of Freud's Oedipus complex. While Fromm implicitly accepted the Oedipus complex in his earlier works, especially in the sense that social movements and rebellions were provoked by a hatred of the ruling father (1963/1930:41), he would later explicitly question (1949a), and then openly reject it in his revisionary stage (1970d). Reich, on the other hand, in radical opposition with position advocated by Freud, argued that the Oedipus complex was not inevitable, but rather was conditioned by the sex-economic structures of a particular manifestation of Occidental culture, and therefore, could be alleviated if children were afforded the chance to rearrange the relations between desire and its objects, that is, if they moved their desire from their parents and invested it within their peers.

Character is perhaps the fundamental conceptual category shared by Reich and Fromm. Both of the mass psychologists held that one's character derives from a dynamic interplay of internal and external processes. Character develops, according to Fromm (1970b/1932:147), on the one hand, in accordance with an individual's physical maturation, particularly as manifested by

the growth of genital sexuality and the physiologically diminishing role of the oral and anal zones...and the concomitant diminution of helplessness, enabling the person to develop an attitude of friendliness and love toward others;

and on the other hand, he believed that the educational system, the family, social norms, as well as institutional and ideological patterns actively create character. Concurring with Fromm, Reich understood character to arise from a similar dialectic in which the self guards against, sublimates, and defers the outer world and the inner, biological world -- a dynamic he referred to as "armoring" (1961/1933). For Reich and Fromm, character solidified prior to adulthood. Reich contended that character structure remained fluid until sexual identity was crystallized (David Smith, personal communication, 05 December 1991). In contrast, Fromm proposed a position more in harmony with orthodox Freudianism, arguing that character took a concrete form during childhood.

Often, according to Reich and Fromm, individuals do not successfully mediate the tensions between socioeconomic conditions and internal drives, resulting in a plethora of psychic disturbances and a series of character types. Both defined a veritable pantheon of character types. Reich isolated the phallic-sadistic, neurotic, masochistic, and hysterical-narcissistic character types -- to name but a few. Initially, Fromm outlined a more orthodox typology, including

anal, oral, and genital; the majority of his early work, however, focused on the authoritarian personality.

#### Enmeshing Psychoanalysis and Dialectical Materialism

At first, the conjunction of Marx and Freud appears oddly problematic, since dialectical materialism addresses and critiques the socioeconomic field, whereas, psychoanalysis questions and responds to an embodied self. According to Reich and Fromm though, the theoretical schemata of Marx and Freud were not mutually exclusive, instead, as materialist approaches to distinct, yet inter-related, elements within the sociocultural field, they augment one another. "Far from contradicting each other", Reich (1976/1953:71, emphasis original) argued Marxism and Freudianism intersect "*in the biological basis of all living matter*". Or as Fromm (1970a/1932:129) stated, this conjunction

will provide a refinement of method, a broader knowledge of the forces at work in social processes, and a greater certainty in understanding the course of history and predicting future historical events.

Indeed, both Reich and Fromm capitalized upon these theoretical perspectives to facilitate their analyses of Weimar Germany, since each proposed a set of interpretive techniques; they instructed "how to read": Marx formulated strategies for interpreting society; whereas, Freud promoted a constellation of tactics for deciphering the psyche. From this foundation, the two separated, explicitly engaging one another in an intense methodological debate during the early 1930s (Fromm 1970a/1932, Reich 1972/1924:65-69): Reich, on the one hand, added Marxism to a decidedly Freudian framework to enhance his response to the problem of sexual repression and suppression in Western capitalism, while Fromm, on the other hand, introduced Freud to his Marxist approach to authority, the family and ideology, producing a theory equally relevant to analyses of both society and the individual.

Reich desired to formulate a political social psychology which would interpret "all human conditions" (1970/1933:17), and clearly, Freud alone could not engender such an approach. To revolutionize the latent possibilities of psychoanalytic theory (including its subversion of the compulsory, (re)productive sexual ideology of Weimar Germany and its ability to elucidate the meaning and function of psychic experience), Reich embraced Marx, incorporating, most especially, his understandings of the modes of production and the hegemony of ideology (Reich 1970/1933:25-26). Reich predicated this integration upon an argument promoting psychoanalysis, like Marxism, as a materialistic and dialectical method. Hence, the two discrete approaches fold smoothly into one another. He dubbed this amalgam the sex-economic mode, which "is not one of the typical attempts to supplement, replace, or confuse Marx with Freud or Freud with Marx", but rather "[it] is essentially a mass-psychological and sex-sociological science" (1970/1933:28). Through such a

theoretical move, Reich integrated Freud and Marx to extrapolate "the relation between sexual suppression and human exploitation" (1970/1933:29).

Psychoanalysis, however, was not to be applied to social phenomena, but instead, only to human behavior. To do otherwise, as Fromm had, Reich argued, resulted in an idealistic and metaphysical social theory.

The point I want to make is that, say, the behavior of people with small savings after a bank failure or a peasants' uprising after a sudden drop in wheat prices cannot be explained by unconscious libidinous motives or as a case of rebellion against the father. (1972/1934:66-67)

In essence, his position critiqued Western society through the mediated domains encompassed by psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism, legitimating itself through a simple equation: "*work and sexuality...are intimately interwoven...[they] derive from the same biologic energy*" (1970/1933:293, emphasis original).

In his integration of psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism, Fromm proposed analytical social psychology, which "seeks to understand the instinctual apparatus of a group, its libidinous and largely unconscious behavior, in terms of its socio-economic structure" (1970a/1932:116). Consequently, for Fromm, psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism dovetail, for not only does the libido derive from socioeconomic circumstances, but also the social relations and economic conditions of any given epoch extend forth from the libidinal drives. Dialectical materialism was given the task in Fromm's thought of elucidating the set of socioeconomic relations which structure a given society, while, he assigned psychoanalysis the role of deciphering the drives and motives behind these relations. According to Fromm, and against Reich, psychoanalytic techniques can be fruitfully applied to the sociocultural field. In fact, one must utilize psychoanalytic techniques to discover the "real" workings behind any given social phenomenon -- whether that be a peasants' uprising or a strike. The two distinct materialistic philosophies, then, work in tandem to enhance one's apprehension of the ideological superstructure which derives from and mediates the tensions among the individual, human psyche and the prevailing socioeconomic conditions.

#### Towards Sexual Revolution

Perhaps, a Paris graffiti, scrawled during the May 1968 unrest, has it right: "The more I make love, the more I want revolution". Undoubtedly, Wilhelm Reich would have appreciated this statement, for his social theory not only revolved around the domain of sexuality, but it also dismantled the associations among power, pleasure, and sociopolitical ideology. In his sex-economic analyses of modern, Western capitalism, he did not adopt or utilize dialectical materialism *in toto*; but instead, Reich focused almost exclusively on the ideological superstructure of Weimar Germany, emphasizing the manner in which socioeconomic forces suppressed sexuality and induced the (proletarian and

petit bourgeois) individual to repress his/her libidinal drives. Although he understood that the negative effects of a culturally restrained sexuality extend across class boundaries, his analyses of sexual politics openly embraced Marx: "*Sexual inhibition changes the structure of economically suppressed man in such a way that he acts, feels and thinks contrary to his material needs*" (1970/1933:32, emphasis original). Indeed, "*Sexual suppression serves...to mechanize and enslave the masses*" (1970/1933:215, emphasis original). In fact, he contended (1971/1931:xxviii), "[it] is one of the cardinal ideological means by which the ruling class subjugates the working population." The modern, capitalistic societies of the West subverted the healthy expression of sexuality as well as subjectivity through morality, compulsory marriage, the patriarchal family, and the like.

The development and perpetuation of fascism, according to Reich, was rooted in the same structures. And more, "fascist race theory" results from "a mortal fear of natural sexuality and its orgasm function" (1970/1933:84). To marginalize "free-love", reactionary political movements, like fascism and nationalism, proliferate an ideology of (re)productive sexuality. To complete its denigration of the domain of sexuality, "Nationalistic fascism...transfers sexual sensuality to the 'alien race,' which is relegated to an inferior status in this way" (1970/1933:89). Since it fashioned a sexual politics of reaction, National Socialism was empowered to control the masses and also further its hegemony.

To usurp the prevailing authoritarian order, Reich called for a sexual revolution. The overthrow of the prevailing order of reactionary sexuality, he argued, would require a rearrangement of women's, children's and adolescents' sexuality. Indeed, "*Sexually awakened women, affirmed and recognized as such,*" he believed, "*would mean the complete collapse of the authoritarian ideology*" (1970/1933:105, emphasis original). To this end, Reich advocated the adoption of organizational and ideological alternatives, like replacing the current patriarchal order with a familial structure and social organization rooted in matriarchy and supplanting compulsory marriage with enduring sexual relationships. He based such conclusions on the following proposition: "To define freedom is to define sexual health" (1970/1933:346). Although in many ways seemingly simplistic, Reich's perspective makes perfect sense. If "the core of emotional functioning is the sexual function," then "the core of political (pragmatic) psychology is sex politics" (1971/1931:xxiii). In other words, within Reich's psychoanalytic social theory, since sexuality occupied a central position in the development and workings of human subjectivity as enmeshed within the material relations of modern, patriarchal capitalism, it necessarily constituted the key political problem for psychology -- and social activism as well. Throughout his early writings, Reich remained true to this logic, unraveling the authoritarian order of sexuality, while offering revolutionary alternatives -- theoretical and otherwise -- to replace it.

For a Theory of Human Relatedness

In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Wilhelm Reich (1970/1933:219) vehemently attacked Fromm's psychoanalytic social theory:

More than any others, it was Erich Fromm who later managed to disregard completely the sexual problem of masses of people and its relationship to the fear of freedom and craving for authority.

Such a reading, however, is far too simplistic, for Fromm did not uniformly discard or consistently purge sexuality from his approach, but rather, vacillated in his commitment to "having sex" in his analyses. This is not to say that Fromm lacked an appreciation of its importance. On contrary, even after Reich's dismissal of his psychoanalytic social theory, Fromm argued (1970c/1934:99):

Sexuality offers one of the most elementary and powerful opportunities for satisfaction and happiness. If it were permitted to the full extent required for the productive development of the human personality, rather than limited by the need to maintain control over the masses...[it] would lead to the breakup of the existing social order.

Obviously, Fromm, like Reich, understood the radical significance of sexuality; however, unlike Reich, he did not simply arrange his social theory around sex acts and body parts.

Despite his awareness of the critical importance of sexuality for a psychoanalytic theory of society, Fromm did not employ it consistently. In his very early research, focusing on class consciousness, ideology, religion, and social control, Fromm had yet to offer the erotic domain a place in his social theory. His 1929 study of the working class of Weimar Germany (1984), for instance, hardly mentioned sexuality. In fact, he included the subject in only 2 of 271 questions which made his study -- the first concerned sex education and the second abortion. Moreover, a year later in "The Dogma of Christ" (1963/1930), he excluded sexuality almost entirely. Almost from nowhere, in the early 1930s, he injected sex into his psychoanalytic social theory. A plethora of works written during this period actively explored sexuality in terms of Freudianism, Marxism, and patriarchal theory, and in relation to society, subjectivity, and human relatedness (1970a/1932, 1970b/1932, 1970c/1934). Again, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm de-emphasized sexuality, as he had in his earliest writings on the interplay between subjectivity and society, only to renew it once more in "Sex and Character" (1949b). Ironically, in this essay, which in many ways marks the culmination of his more orthodox Freudian approach and the continuation of his revisionary efforts, he presented perhaps his most thorough and detailed discussion of sexuality. Fromm's early writings playfully fluctuated in their consideration of the fit among the erotic, psychic and social domains, neither universally highlighting nor completely abandoning the significance of "having sex" within Critical Theory.

In concert with his ludic employment of sexuality, Fromm endeavored to grapple with the place of interpersonal relationships in a psychoanalytic social theory. Indeed, for Fromm (1941:19), the very essence of humanity was not sex, but "the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness." As a result, he turned to investigate the intersection of human relatedness, authority, and freedom.

Whereas Reich had predicated freedom upon the idea of sexual revolution, Fromm rooted it within interpersonal relationships. At root, he contended (1941:23), humanity,

has no choice but to unite [itself] with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work or else to seek a kind of security by such ties with the world as destroy...freedom and the integrity of [the] individual self.

In other words, people can either embrace freedom, accepting the enriching effects of human solidarity or escape from freedom, submitting themselves to misery, exploitation, and destruction. While this dialectic of independence emerged most strikingly in the rise of fascism, threatening the future of democracy as well, it took form over time, arising from a series of ideological, socioeconomic and cultural patterns.

Historically, he suggested, as humanity has become "free from" the animalistic constraints of instinct, the rigid demands of nature, and so on, it has not become equally "free to" govern itself or live happily, precisely because freedom is a dialectic, intimately interwoven with the problematics of individuation, authority, and submission.

On the hand it is a process of growing strength and integration, mastery over nature, growing power of human reason, and growing solidarity with other human beings. But on the other hand this growing individuation means growing isolation, insecurity, and...a growing feeling of one's own powerlessness and insignificance as an individual (1941:35-36).

Despite the positive effects of freedom upon humanity, it also encourages the subject to submit to authority, to lose his/herself in the bondage of the state, the exploitation of class relations, and the mass spectacle of domination. Expanding his psychoanalytic social theory beyond the sexually-centered approach advocated by Reich, Fromm produced a method of inquiry sensitive to the interpersonal dynamics of authority and oppression, a theoretical schema attentive to the role of human relatedness in the formation of subjectivity and the perpetuation of society.

Conclusions

Clearly, Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm used the domain of sexuality in divergent fashions. Reich's mass psychology revolved around sexuality, focusing upon it as the primary sociological, biological, and psychological

problem confronting modern Occidental culture. Fromm's psychoanalytic social theory, in contrast, positioned sexuality as a piece of a larger psycho-social assemblage, granting it a significant role in the contemporary human condition, but devoting itself equally to other substantive concerns. Beyond scholastic, personal, and political concerns, the distinct perspectives derived from a number of nuances within their theoretical schemata, including the significance of the libido, their interpretations of instinct and inversely their understandings of society, as well as the peculiarities of their integrations of dialectical materialism. In sum, while Reich uniformly drew upon the domain of sexuality to critique modern, capitalistic Europe, calling for a sexual revolution; Fromm vacillated in his commitment to "having sex" in his psychoanalytic social theory, focusing his analyses on human relatedness, authority, and freedom instead of the erotic connections among bodies.

More decidedly than Fromm, the early writings of the proponents of Critical Theory marginalized, or even ignored, sexuality. Initially, the members of the Frankfurt School de-emphasized instinctual drives, and the libido in particular; they "did not have sex," moreover, precisely because they imported Freud in a partial and fragmented fashion. The vacillations, disinflections, and eventual rejection of Freudianism which surfaced in Fromm's work did not, however, trace a similar trajectory within Critical Theory as a whole; rather, certain later projects within this "tradition", such as those of Adorno (Adorno et al. 1982/1950), Marcuse (1955), and Horkheimer, renewed the significance of Freudianism for the Marxist social theory characteristic of the Frankfurt School. Significantly, they did not focus primarily on sex acts, body parts, or the connections among power, pleasure, and liberation as Reich had. Instead, Adorno and his colleagues returned to Fromm's early work to revise a theory of the authoritarian personality; while Marcuse re-opened the previous dialogue with Freud to explore the relationships between sexuality, subjectivity, and society. Perhaps ironically, the celebrity enjoyed by Wilhelm Reich during the so-called sexual revolution rekindled an interest in the early phases of Critical Theory -- which did not have sex.

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